

The St. John's Pulpit

St. John's Baptist Church 300 Hawthorne Lane Charlotte, NC 28204
704.333.5428 www.stjohnsbaptistchurch.org



ACTIVE FAITH: A DECLARATION OF INTERDEPENDENCE

Psalm 139:23-24; Hebrews 12; John 13:34-35; Romans 12:1-11

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The Rev. Dennis W. Foust, PhD, Senior Minister

One day, in a city amphitheater, an orchestra offered a free concert. A father took his young daughter. They arrived as the orchestra members were gathering. The conductor noticed them waiting and walked over to introduce herself. About that time, the orchestra members started tuning their instruments. The sound was terrible, of course. The girl covered her ears and asked, "What are they doing?" The father smiled as the conductor offered this answer: "Inside each of those people and musical instruments there are beautiful notes waiting to be played. But, first, they have to get out all of the bad notes and that is what you are hearing now."

Welcome to Church. When each of us, as members of God's orchestra, has humbly confessed our sin unto God and been embraced by God's forgiveness, the world can hear the beauty of God's love through us. This is why we are in a season of spiritual renewal.

For thousands of years, people have prayed Psalm 139:23-24 – "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." The idea of 'wicked way' is a phrase describing sin. Hymn writer, James Orr, offers the phrase, "Cleanse me from every sin, and set me free."

In our nation, we are big on independence. There is nothing wicked about independence. Yet, God created us for more than independence. God created us for interdependence. If each citizen of these United States merely expressed independence, we would have more problems than we encounter today. In fact, most of the problems we face are because too many people over-emphasize dependence, co-dependence or independence. Of course, there must be an acceptance of personal responsibility for self. But, there is a difference between self-responsibility and self-reliance. In matters of sickness, dependence can be necessary. Dependence may not be the goal, but maturity is not achieved when we reach independence. I OFFER A DECLARATION OF INTERDEPENDENCE BASED UPON THREE IDEAS.

1. MATURITY BEGINS WHEN WE REALIZE WE ARE INTERDEPENDENT.

A few years ago, I was leading a weekend seminar in Kentucky focused on Adult Faith Formation. At a break, the owner of a coal company approached me to disagree with my design. He was quite wealthy and sought to convince me that he was independently successful. So, I asked him how many people worked in his mines. He proudly told me that he employed more than 4,000 workers. I asked him how many buyers purchased his coal. He named three primary companies. I asked him how many energy plants, households and businesses used his coal. He didn't know exactly; but it was in the tens of thousands. We never crossed paths again. I do not know if my questions helped him realize he was interdependently successful.

Friends, we are created to need one another. When Jesus gave his followers a new commandment, he said, "*Love one another.*" And, with that mandate, Jesus created an alternative community to reveal God's love in the world. The early Church repeatedly focused on one-anothering: *pray for one another; encourage one another; serve one another; accept one another; forgive one another; be at peace with one another;* and on and on.

One reason why, on this All Saints Sunday, we read the list of members who have passed on ahead of us into the land that is fairer than day is because they have touched our lives – individually and congregationally. We are interdependent; we need one another!

The Letter to the Hebrews lists numerous faith models: Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David and Samuel. This 'great cloud of witnesses' inspires us still. Hebrews then points us to Jesus, who calls us to love and serve.

MATURITY BEGINS WHEN WE REALIZE WE ARE INTERDEPENDENT.

2. INTERDEPENDENCE REQUIRES PERSONAL AND COMMUNAL COMMITMENT

In Romans 12, we are challenged to present ourselves to God as living sacrifices. We refuse to be conformed to the ideas that hold this world captive. Through our commitments to God, we are being transformed so we can discern the will of God. So, we do not see ourselves more highly than we ought, but we see ourselves as part of the body of Christ. Friends, while you must make an individual commitment to follow of Jesus, your commitment cannot be lived out individualistically because we are members of one another. You need one another.

Several years ago, a group of Southern Baptists travelled to a town in northern Indiana to explore whether they should begin a new church there. Most of the 600 residents are Amish or Mennonite. In front of the General Store, one Southern Baptist asked a Mennonite farmer if he were a Christian. The farmer had never been asked this question and did not want to offend the fellow, for he seemed to be sincerely interested in him. So, the farmer gave to the questioner the names of ten people who knew him well. He suggested the questioner go ask those ten people whether they thought he reflected the spirit of Christ in his life because he would certainly not presume to be so proud of his own witness that his testimony would be all he could offer.

Over the years, I have served numerous people who think they can be connected with God, yet be disconnected from God's people. Usually, they call on me when they realize they are mistaken. As members of St. John's, we are part of the body of Christ. We need the differing gifts of one another to help us accomplish more together than we can ever do alone. As you learned in childhood, there is no 'I' in Church; but 'U R' in the middle of 'church.'

In this twenty-first century, we are connected with the Internet of Things. Yet, many people are primarily connected to what makes them live for now or live for self. If they become involved in a cause, it is often nothing more than a way for them to push forward their biases, prejudices and self-absorbed, individualistic interests. In the Church, God gives to us a mission that flows from God's heart; a mission incarnated in Jesus inspiring us to be involved in the world as interdependent servants. Our Active Faith connects us with God and with one another and with the needs of the world. Through Christ's Church, our purposes and visions transcend our individualistic causes. As members of St. John's, we make personal and communal commitments to The Living God and to the mission of God.

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INTERDEPENDENCE REQUIRES PERSONAL AND COMMUNAL COMMITMENT.

3. INTERDEPENDENCE CALLS US TO SHARE OUR LIVES AND OUR GIFTS.

You are dedicated to being a servant church. I commend you for knowing that your identity is not ultimately expressed by your political affiliation or your national citizenship. Your identity is expressed by your Active Faith, as followers of Jesus, the Christened One who reveals God as love.

A few weeks ago, we entered this Season of Spiritual Renewal focusing on Jesus' compassion for people who are like sheep without a shepherd. Jesus saw the need for people like you who would be motivated by their relationship with God to serve those who are harassed and helpless. Jesus gives us these words: "*Pray to the Lord of the Harvest that he will send out laborers into his harvest.*" Jesus sees us as interdependent.

Through the past five years, more than 120 people have become members of St. John's. Today, I ask you to join me in praying and envisioning that more than 250 people will become new members of St. John's over the next five years. The Charlotte Business Journal and UNC Chapel Hill's Demography Institute project metro Charlotte's population will grow by more than 40% by 2030. Our area of the city will be at the center of this population growth. And many of these people need a church like St. John's; they need a people like you. They need to be influenced by you. They need to relate with you as people of Active Faith. They need your trust of God. They need to be shaped by your commitments to follow Jesus. They need your experience of redemption and what you have learned about worship, compassion, hospitality, Christ-like community, encouragement, forgiveness, joyful witness, stewardship and servant living. They need to move beyond a declaration of independence to faithful interdependence.

A medical doctor in Philadelphia told the story of a nine year old boy whose sister was seriously ill. She desperately needed a blood transfusion. The doctor explained to the boy that she had the same disease he had conquered a few years earlier. The boy listened as the doctor sat with their parents explaining that she needed a blood transfusion from someone who had overcome the disease and who shared her rare blood type. The doctor then asked, "*Would you give your blood to save your sister?*" The boy hesitated for a moment. He looked over at his father holding his mother while she sobbed. Then he looked at the doctor and said, "*Yes sir; I'll do it.*" Two days later, the siblings were wheeled into the same room and the blood began to flow. Toward the end of the transfusion, the boy looked at the doctor and asked, "*How long till I die?*" In that moment, the doctor realized the boy thought he was giving his life for his sister. As the doctor explained to the boy that he was saving his sister's life and making it possible for him to enjoy his sister and family in healthier ways, the boy expressed deep joy.

The closest we come to sharing blood transfusions may be gathering around The Lord's Table to share symbols of communion. The bread and cup are declarations of interdependence. They remind us to ask God to cleanse us from every sin. They remind us that we are part of a flowing stream called Christ's Church. And, they challenge us to take the interdependence of this sanctuary to a world that needs our Active Faith. Let it be so! Amen and AMEN!